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PRELUDE TO DESERT STORM:  
A CASE STUDY IN THE  
POLITICIZATION OF INTELLIGENCE

BY

COL. WYLAND F. LEADBETTER JR.

CDR. STEPHEN J. BURY

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The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is charged with the responsibility for collection and analysis of intelligence and its distribution to the president and his staff. In recent years this responsibility has been expanded to include Congress and other government departments and agencies.

As policymakers deal with more complicated and time-sensitive issues they look for clear and complete intelligence information that will inform and guide their decision-making efforts. Policymakers work with ambiguity and complexity. There is a natural tendency for them to seek intelligence information which supports their own view. They consider intelligence information which fails to support their position to be a potential political threat. Some will ignore unfavorable intelligence, while others may attempt to discredit it through the political process (Gates, 218-221).

It is also generally acknowledged that in a politically charged environment some policymakers selectively use intelligence to influence public debate or policy. A small number disingenuously label intelligence they dislike as too soft, biased, slanted or "cooked" to destroy its legitimacy (Gates, 219).

CIA officers are well aware of these problems in their supporting relationships with policymakers. Working to keep its integrity, the CIA's ongoing challenge is to provide honest and unbiased assessments, and to strongly resist the influence of politicization of its intelligence products. Sometimes CIA assessments are wrong, and certainly there have been occasions when analysts have given in to political pressure and bias from superiors. However, the CIA strives to prevent undue political influence and, as the current director, Robert M. Gates, wrote in 1987, "There is no charge to which those in the CIA are more sensitive than that of cooking intelligence- of slanting its report to support policy" (Gates, 227).

Prior to Desert Storm hostilities in January 1991, members of Congress and the press accused the CIA of bias, politicization and "cooking" assessments on the effectiveness of the United Nations' economic sanctions on Iraq. These charges were lost in the euphoria of the quick military victory in the Gulf War, but they have not been forgotten. Who made such accusations? Are they valid? Was the intelligence information biased, politicized or "cooked" as charged or was this itself a case of politicization of a CIA product? This paper will seek to answer these questions. First let us review the events surrounding the charges.

## EVENTS

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. Four days later the United Nations Security Council imposed mandatory economic sanctions against Iraq, and President Bush ordered U.S. troops to the Persian Gulf. On 29 November 1990 the Security Council authorized coalition forces in the Persian Gulf region to use "all necessary force" to expel Iraq from Kuwait if Iraq failed to withdraw by January 15, 1991.

On 5 December 1990, Judge William Webster, director of the CIA, testified before the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) on the progress of sanctions being employed against Iraq. He stated that the embargo was hurting the Iraqi economy and the lack of spare parts and other supplies would begin to degrade the Iraqi air force's capability after three months and the Iraqi army capability after nine months. He cautioned that "economic hardships" would not guarantee that Hussein would change his policies.

During the testimony Judge Webster inadvertently omitted a word from his prepared text which changed the meaning of a portion of the testimony. This omission was never corrected and remains today in the formal congressional record. Although the error in the testimony did not change the fundamental conclusions

about the sanctions, it clearly caused confusion in the press and in Congress. More about this later.

On 6 December an article appeared in the New York Times addressing the Webster testimony, concluding the CIA assessment was at odds with the administration by stressing the effectiveness of sanctions. During our investigation we found no other article that put this particular spin on the Webster testimony. This article was distributed to members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI). A senior staffer at SSCI noticed the unique spin and brought this to the attention of the CIA Public Affairs Office (Interview, Currie). Clearly, the CIA was aware of the article, but made the decision not to write a formal rebuttal.

On 9 January 1991 Chairman Les Aspin of the HASC, in a letter to Judge Webster, requested an update to the 5 December testimony and answers to specific questions. The next day Judge Webster provided the chairman a written response to his request. In the letter, Judge Webster specifically referenced the 5 December testimony and reiterated that even if sanctions continued to be enforced for an additional six to twelve months, economic hardships alone would be unlikely to compel Hussein to retreat from Kuwait.

In early January, Congress debated the use of force. During the debates, Senator Hollings (D-S.C.)

accused the CIA of politicizing the assessment, saying, "I do not care what CIA Director Webster says now, politicizing his intelligence report as he does." Representative Fazio (D-Calif.) accused the CIA of being ambiguous in the assessment, saying, "the letter by the CIA just yesterday to change the thrust of the December testimony is ambiguous at best" (U.S. 1991). And Senator Boren (D-Okla.) in an intelligence committee meeting on 11 January suggested politicization and even possible bias by the CIA saying the letter response to the HASC was trying not to "cast doubt on decisions the president has reached" about the sufficiency of the sanctions and he noted that the "factual data presented by the CIA" to his committee, some of it in classified form, allowed "very different conclusions" to be drawn about the effectiveness of the economic sanctions (Smith, A25). On 12 January both the House and the Senate approved the use of "all the means necessary" to expel Iraq from Kuwait.

One month later, Sidney Blumenthal, in an 11 February article in the New Republic, accused the CIA and Judge Webster of "cooking" testimony to support the administration's policy. He wrote, "When the president's policy was sanctions, the CIA provided the gist of supporting data. But when the policy shifted overnight, so did the CIA. Its post-cold-war mission began to look remarkably like its worst moments during

the cold war: using intelligence to serve the shifting, short-term political objectives of the president..." The CIA, in a press release, challenged this accusation "on all counts."

In light of these events and the serious accusations, let us first investigate the "cooking" charge that CIA changed the assessment to support administration policy. Is this true or false? If true, who changed the assessment and why? If false, what contributed to the myth?

#### CIA ASSESSMENTS AND CONGRESS

After the imposition of U.N. economic sanctions on Iraq, the CIA continued to closely monitor the effect of these sanctions. The Agency presented classified and unclassified briefings for the president and for the intelligence oversight committees in Congress. When asked, the CIA also provided similar briefings to other policymakers.

In testimony to the HASC on 5 December, Judge Webster addressed what the sanctions had already accomplished and what they would likely accomplish over time. In his analysis, Judge Webster drew some important conclusions:



- At the technical level sanctions dealt a serious blow to the Iraqi economy.

- There was no assurance or guarantee that economic hardships would compel Saddam to change his policies.

- Although sanctions were hurting Iraq's civilian economy, they were affecting the Iraqi military only at the margins.

- Probably only energy-related and some military industries would still be (fully) functioning by the following spring.

The assessment was informative and well-received by the committee and not politically controversial. While reading the prepared text, Judge Webster inadvertently omitted the word " fully " from the conclusion and said "probably only energy-related and some military industries will still be (----) functioning by next spring." The real significance of this mistake was never completely appreciated or immediately noticed by the CIA. In fact, the congressional record contains the text with the omission and the error has not been corrected (U.S. 1990).

The result was that two quite different versions of the same assessment were circulating in Washington. In one, "only energy--related and military industries would be fully functioning"; in the other, "only energy--related and military industries would be

functioning." When viewed in light of the effect of sanctions on the entire industrial base of Iraq, one could draw very different conclusions on the effect of the embargo based on the version read.

In the face of a pending debate in Congress on support of the president's policy to conduct military action, Congressman Aspin (D-Wis.), sent Judge Webster a letter requesting an update of the assessment given on December 5, 1990. Specifically he requested that Webster address:

- The impact of sanctions on the economy and the populace of Iraq, as well as on the operational effectiveness of its military in the next six to twelve months.

- The effect of sanctions on Iraq's defensive abilities in the next six to twelve months.

- The likelihood that, if sanctions remain for six to twelve months, the action might induce Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

Aware that these questions were politically motivated and were intended for the upcoming congressional debate, Judge Webster's letter was carefully worded and linked to the testimony previously given to the committee on the 5th of December. The CIA analysts who worked on this testimony also prepared the January 10th letter for Judge Webster. Since there had

been no significant change in the CIA estimate from December to January, it is not surprising that both assessments were clearly similar in tone and substance. The conclusions provided for this assessment include:

- The ability of the Iraqi ground forces to defend Kuwait and southern Iraq was unlikely to be substantially eroded over the next six to twelve months even if effective sanctions could be maintained.

- Sanctions had shut off nearly all Iraq's trade and financial activity and weakened its economy, but disruption in most sectors was not serious.

- Continued belief that economic hardships alone were unlikely to compel Saddam to retreat from Kuwait.

In a careful side-by-side comparison, the CIA assessments, both classified and unclassified, provided to Congress in December and January, were objective and consistent in tone and message. In fact, our review of the CIA assessments starting in August immediately following the Iraqi invasion into Kuwait, through the January timeframe, show a clear pattern of consistency. However, the inherent confusion created by the omitted text in the 5 December testimony could lead one to believe that the testimony was ambiguous, although the final conclusion of the assessment remained unchanged.

The accusations of bias and "cooking" testimony were not substantiated. Discussions, after the fact, with Judge Webster and the CIA analysts, who prepared the analysis, confirmed that there had been no intention or need to change the CIA assessment. The CIA did not receive any new information between December and January which would have warranted any change in the assessment (Interview, Wiley).

Sensitive by their own admission to criticism for lack of objectivity, and aware of the political debate ongoing in Congress and on the front pages of the nation's newspapers, the analysts took pains to prepare each assessment to ensure its message was consistent and clear of political bias (Interview, Wiley). What then contributed to the myth that the CIA had in fact changed the assessment?

#### MEDIA INFLUENCE

The media coverage of the CIA testimony to Congress during this period was, on the whole, balanced and fair. The press was unaware of the omitted text and seemed to cover the CIA testimony in light of the bigger issue, that of the upcoming congressional debate. However, in the opinion of Judge Webster, one article in the New York Times distorted the CIA

assessment and was the ultimate cause for the later accusation of bias (Interview, Webster).

Michael Wines, in his December 5th article in the New York Times, put a spin on Judge Webster's testimony. Wines, quoting the text with the omitted word, suggested that the CIA had now "appeared to part company with the administration on the question of whether and when the sanctions might erode Iraq's military forces" (A1).

This spin was unique. Other newspapers covered the same story and used the prepared text, which had been distributed during the hearing. The Washington Post in a December 6th article by George Lardner Jr. had no such spin and did not find that the CIA had parted company with the administration (A43).

Wines' article in the sea of newsprint would not seem vitally important to the CIA. In fact, the agency had seen the article and had recognized that it did not fairly represent the testimony or the assessment by the agency. Judge Webster himself made the decision not to rebut the article because the article quoted his entire testimony (Interview, 1991).

What the CIA failed to appreciate was the influence of Wines' article published in the New York Times. The article, uncontested by the CIA, in the opinion of one

intelligence oversight staffer, provided the perception to members of the Congress that the agency had in fact parted company with the administration on the question of whether and when sanctions might erode Iraq's military forces (Interview, Currie). The unique spin of the article became the "touchstone of reality" (Interview, Wiley).

While there is no clear proof, as suggested by Judge Webster, that the article in the New York Times influenced the myth that the CIA had slanted the assessment on 10 January, it did provide ambiguity and potential ammunition for some members of Congress to criticize the CIA assessments in a concerted effort to discredit and destroy them.

#### BUREAUCRATIC POLITICAL INFLUENCES

With the stage set, the administration had to address the issue of congressional approval prior to committing troops to war in the Gulf. There were many in Congress who did not want to challenge or debate the legality of the War Powers Act. To the administration there was an obvious political need to resolve this issue, especially with the strong pressure in both houses to debate the Persian Gulf situation. Key to the entire issue were the CIA assessments of the effectiveness of the sanctions on Iraq. This became a

linchpin between those who wanted to go to war and those who wanted to wait and give the sanctions time to work.

The HASC began open hearings on 5 December 1990. The outcome of the testimony would spawn three resolutions in the House in early January: one favoring further use of sanctions, another favoring the president's use of force and the third affirming the right of the Congress to declare war. Judge Webster's appearance and testimony before the Congress made his product a political event. The manipulation of that testimony by the bureaucratic political establishment, for their own purposes, was almost irresistible in this politically charged environment.

Controversies over the effectiveness of the sanctions were building for several months. Congressional interest in these issues was behind the formation of two bipartisan coalitions: those who believed that the United States should "wait and see" if the sanctions work and those who believed that the United States should "go" now and remove Saddam from Kuwait.

One group was made up generally of Republicans and a small number of Democrats who supported the president's "go" to war policy. This group included House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin

(D-Wis.), House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Dante Fascell (D-Fla.), and Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (R-Kan.). One of the Democrats, Steven J. Solarz (D-N.Y.), was the enthusiastic drafter of the resolution to support military action and in a closed door strategy meeting he warned his fellow Democrats that the Democratic party could be "kept out of the White House" if it appeared that they denied support to the administration (Broder 25). Other political influences were at work as well. There were indications that some of the Democrats who joined this coalition were long-term supporters of Israel (Lauter 17).

These advocates of the "go to war" policy, not surprisingly, were supportive of the CIA assessments and were quick to use the assessments to support their position in Congress. One did not hear accusations of bias or "cooked" intelligence from this quarter.

The other group was made up of many Democrats in both houses supporting the "wait and see" position. They claimed the sanctions were working and, given time, they would pressure the Iraqi leader to withdraw from Kuwait and avert war. This group included Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.), Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), and House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Chairman Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.).



Those advocating the "wait and see" approach endorsed the continued "slow pain" of sanctions rather than war. Some were concerned about casualties and believed that waiting would allow for some deterioration of the Iraqi military. Some may have had more parochial interests. But, clearly the majority of this group found the CIA assessments provided no support for their personal political position on the war. Most ignored the CIA assessments.

A few, including Congressmen Hollings (D-S.C.) and Fazio (D-Calif.), made a concerted effort to discredit the assessments by accusing the CIA of presenting an ambiguous product and worse, by politicization of the product, caving in to administration pressure and changing their assessment.

Senator Boren "may have felt betrayed" by the CIA position, believing that the 5 December assessment was a change from the CIA position in October and November of 1990 (Interview, Ott). On January 11, 1991, he invited the CIA to brief the effectiveness of sanctions to his intelligence committee and he invited all members of the Senate to attend. Many came to listen. One can speculate that Senator Boren wanted to use what he believed to be a change in the CIA assessment to influence his Senate colleagues, to support his vision of restraint, allowing time for the sanctions to work.

What is clear is that some members of this group did attempt to discredit the assessments of the CIA by accusing the CIA of politicizing its intelligence report and by declaring the estimates ambiguous and biased. The effort by various members of Congress to discredit the legitimacy of the assessment therefore appears to be the result either of a misunderstanding of the original testimony or a political ploy to enhance their own political agenda. These accusations were the genesis of the myth of change that clouded the integrity of the CIA assessments.

During periods of tense decision-making, when the political stakes are high and the CIA assessment is center stage in the decision-making process, as it was in this issue, it is only reasonable to assume that the assessment will be manipulated by those members of Congress who disagree with the assessment and want it discredited. For those whose position is supported by the CIA assessment, that assessment stands as a standard for their cause. For those whose position is threatened by the CIA assessment, that assessment stands as a target for them to attack, discredit and destroy (Interview, Ott).

## CONCLUSION

We were satisfied throughout the research for this paper that the CIA assessment was made by experts in their respective fields. We were given no reason to doubt the integrity of the CIA or its director, Judge Webster. We found no truth to the accusations of CIA intent to slant or "cook" intelligence for political purposes. It became apparent that the agency was taking extra steps to insure the non-political nature of the report. This effort could have led people to believe the assessments were somewhat ambiguous.

Omitting the word "fully" from the 5 December testimony caused confusion, ambiguity and possibly provided the momentum for the unique spin of Michael Wines' article in the New York Times. While one could claim the omitted text changed the CIA estimate of the effect of the sanctions on the economy of Iraq, it did not change the conclusions of the assessment that continued sanctions would not cause Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

Michael Wines' article created further confusion and ambiguity by confirming a perception by some in Congress, while providing an opportunity for others to accuse the CIA and Judge Webster of changing the CIA assessment. The integrity of the CIA and Judge Webster was now in question. The fact that the CIA did not

rebut Michael Wines' article represents a failure to appreciate the influence of the New York Times and opened the door for later accusations and criticism about the assessments.

Judge Webster's letter response answered the politically crafted questions of the HASC and continued to support the view that the CIA had given in earlier testimony, that sanctions alone would not force Saddam to leave Kuwait. The CIA did not intend to change its conclusions from the earlier testimony and from our investigation they in fact did not.

Accusations of politicization, bias and "cooking" by the CIA were not substantiated. Both assessments were similar in substance and conclusions. The omitted text, the Michael Wines article and the politically motivated questions, all clearly added confusion to the debate in Congress and provided ammunition for some to discredit the CIA assessment. The Michael Wines article provided the most ammunition for those in Congress who wanted to wait and let the sanctions work. While elements of the assessment could be considered soft and ambiguous due to the omitted word, the conclusions remained rock hard.

The political environment was electrically charged with a debate on the most important national security issue since Vietnam. Political manipulation of the CIA

product by some in Congress in an effort to discredit and destroy the legitimacy of the assessment should have been expected. Is this manipulation by Congress a politicization of the CIA product? We believe it clearly was. It was not the CIA that was guilty of politicization but those in Congress who politicized the products by manipulating the assessments and using them as a weapon in the political debate.

One could argue that a clearer and more concise intelligence product might have produced less ambiguity and confusion and might have better met the needs of the policymaker in his important decision-making process. Our analysis indicates that the packaging did not generate the criticism from the policymaker but rather the content. In this highly charged political environment with emotions at a fever pitch, regardless of how the product was packaged, the content would have remained the same and for some policymakers it would be a target for them to politicize, discredit and destroy.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The CIA responsibility to provide intelligence products to the policymaker remains a critically important aspect of the decision-making process. It is important that that product is apolitical and unbiased, clear and concise, and that it meets the needs of the

decision-maker. At times, the political environment into which this product is thrust is electric with emotions, rich with high political stakes and deep with political divisions. One can only conclude that under these conditions political manipulation of the intelligence product is inevitable. We agree, but believe actions can be taken by the CIA to reduce their vulnerability while at the same time providing a quality product.

First, the CIA must continue to make every effort to keep its products free from bias and politicization from within. The integrity of the intelligence product is essential for the agency to service its consumers with a quality product.

Secondly, any known error in an intelligence product in the hands of the decision-maker must be corrected at the earliest opportunity and if an important intelligence product is misrepresented in the press it must be vigorously rebutted immediately.

Thirdly, the agency should seek a more standard format for presenting intelligence estimates to the policymaker. In cooperation with the congressional intelligence committees, the agency should develop a format that is agreeable to the policymaker and the intelligence community. This could go a long way to alleviate criticism of the intelligence product.

Lastly, the CIA must understand and appreciate the potential for political manipulation of their intelligence product by the very same policymakers they are trying to serve. While their product must be apolitical and unbiased it often will be thrust into a very political and combative environment where for some, their product is the standard for a cause while for others, it is a target to discredit and destroy.

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